

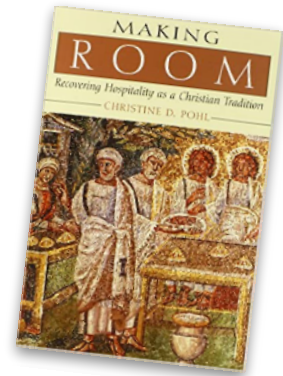
Making A Place for Hospitality¹

Christine Pohl

Chapter 8

"If there is room in the heart, there is room in the house."

DANISH PROVERB²



Because hospitality is basic to who we are as followers of Jesus, every aspect of our lives can be touched by its practice. If we use hospitality as a lens through which to examine our homes, churches, jobs, schools, health care, and politics, might we see them differently? Can we make the places which shape our lives and in which we spend our days more hospitable? Do current practices within these settings distort hospitality or shut out strangers?

It is important to look at specific settings for hospitality because welcome is always offered from within a "place" that combines physical space, social relationships, and particular meanings and values.³ Making a place for hospitality is not only about creating or transforming a physical environment to make room for a few extra people. The human relationships and commitments that shape the setting affect whether it is or is not welcoming.

Jesus' words in Matthew 25:35, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me," do not refer to any particular physical location for hospitality. Instead, the verse challenges us to examine our practices of welcome to strangers in every setting. Jesus' words are more closely associated with relationships than with location - I was a stranger and you received me into your group. Whatever the location, unless the invitation is given, it is a setting in which the stranger would not feel free to enter. It is somehow bounded space, a set of relations which convention says does not have to be open to strangers.

The story of Abraham's hospitality to the angels (Gen. 18) is relevant as we reflect on places for hospitality. He and Sarah welcomed the strangers into their household - but households then included economic, political, religious, and familial activities. Because in the households of ancient societies, these aspects of life were not highly differentiated, hospitality was intertwined with all of them. Thinking about hospitality today requires intentionality in applying it to the complex and separate spheres of contemporary life.

¹ Excerpt from: Christine D. Pohl. *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality As a Christian Tradition* (Kindle Location 1693-1806). Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1999, Grand Rapids, MI, Kindle Edition.

² Quoted in Philip Hallie, *Tales of Good and Evil, Help and Harm* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 54.

³ Tim Cresswell, *In Place/Out of Place* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 157. See also F. W. Dillistone, *Traditional Symbols and the Contemporary World* (London: Epworth Press, 1973), 85-102, for an excellent discussion of space and place in the Christian tradition.

The need to make places for hospitality is unquestionable, however. Elie Wiesel writes, "Our century is marked by displacements on the scale of continents.... Never before have so many human beings fled from so many homes."⁴ Even if we think only about the needs of refugees, we quickly see the necessity of hospitable responses at various levels. Refugees need a compassionate response from the international community; they also depend on individual nations, communities, churches, and families to be willing to make a place for them.

Many of our contemporary responses to the needs of strangers require minimal personal investment and responsibility; we depend on large-scale institutions and specialists in almost every area of life. Assuming some personal responsibility for hospitality to strangers can therefore seem daunting. But hospitality requires both personal and communal commitment, and settings which combine aspects of public and private life.

A first step in making a place for hospitality may be to make room in our hearts. Whether or not we can always find room in our houses, welcome begins with dispositions characterized by love and generosity. Hearts can be enlarged by praying that God will give us eyes to see the opportunities around us, and by putting ourselves in places where we are likely to encounter strangers in need of welcome. At different times in our lives our capacity for hospitality will vary, and different kinds of strangers will require different types of responses. Although a particular family may not be able to take a homeless person into their home, that family can participate with others in creating a place that is welcoming to homeless people. When our lives are open to hospitality, opportunities will come to make a place for others. And, in doing so, our places and our lives will be enriched and transformed.

Characteristics of Hospitable Places

What makes a space inviting? By looking at personal places - small-scale environments like homes and other informal settings - we can identify certain characteristics that are also relevant in larger environments. Hospitable places are comfortable and lived in; they are settings in which people are flourishing. Although not necessarily beautifully maintained or decorated, they are evidently cared for. Such places provide the people that inhabit them with shelter and sanctuary in the deepest sense of these words - not only with the shelter of physical buildings but also with the shelter of relationships. Such places are safe and stable, offering people a setting where "they can rest for awhile to collect themselves." Hospitable places are not frenetic, though people within them may be busy. When sanctuary and a slower pace are combined, there is a sense of peace.

In such places life is celebrated, yet the environment also has room for brokenness and deep disappointments. Such places make faith and a hospitable way of life seem natural, not forced. Hospitable settings are often enhanced by the simple beauty of creation, where body, soul, and

⁴ Elie Wiesel, "Longing for Home," in *The Longing for Home*, ed. Leroy S. Rouner (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 19.

spirit are fed by attention to small details such as attractively prepared and good-tasting food, or flowers from a nearby garden. Attention to these details expresses an appreciation for life which has more to do with taking time than with having money.

When we have opportunities to design settings and physical environments, an important consideration should be to identify the types of architecture and arrangements that communicate a sense of welcome and enable hospitality to occur. Inviting entrances and accessible facilities, comfortable furnishings and adequate lighting are important. Designing layouts that are somewhat public yet encourage personal conversation can foster easier interactions among strangers.

Hospitable places are alive with particular commitments and practices; however, guests are not coerced into sharing them. Although the human relationships within such places may demonstrate God's existence, communicate God's love, and invite response, welcome does not violate the stranger's identity and integrity.

Kathleen Norris describes the hospitality of Benedictine monasteries as "powerful without being seductive."⁵

Hospitable places allow room for friendships to grow. Food, shelter, and companionship are all interrelated in these settings. In such environments, weary and lonely persons can be restored to life. Jean Vanier writes that when people sense "that they are wanted and loved as they are and that they have a place, then we witness a real transformation - I would even say 'resurrection'."⁶ Years ago, John Cogley described the restoration of persons he witnessed in a Catholic Worker House of Hospitality:

The security of the House, poor as it was, regular meals, a sure place to sleep, work to be done, the knowledge of being useful to others ... and the casual but very real fellowship of... the place these things were enough. It was often as if you could see a change taking place before your eyes, like something visible happening color returning to a face after a faint. As he went on to observe: "Even the crudest hospitality can work miracles."⁷

A Place in Our Homes

The frequency with which people define hospitality as "making someone feel at home" demonstrates the integral connection in our experience between hospitality and home. This connection is also communicated in the common Hispanic expression of welcome, "*mi casa es to*

⁵ Kathleen Norris, *Dakota* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1993), 198.

⁶ Jean Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 15.

⁷ John Cogley, "House of Hospitality," October 1947, in *A Penny a Copy: Readings from "The Catholic Worker,"* ed. Thomas C. Cornell, Robert Ellsberg, and Jim Forest (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995), 56.

casa" - "my house is your house." Homes are the most personal settings into which we can invite people.

The possibility of welcoming Jesus into one's home shaped ancient church teachings on home-based hospitality. Chrysostom instructed his parishioners: "Make for yourself a guest-chamber in your own house: set up a bed there, set up a table there and a candlestick. [cp. 2 Kings 4:10].... Have a room to which Christ may come; say, 'This is Christ's cell; this building is set apart for Him.'" Christ's room, Chrysostom wrote, would be for the "maimed, the beggars, and the homeless." Even if it were inadequate, "Christ disdains it not."⁸

Setting aside space for a stranger in the form of a "Christ room" was important to Peter Maurin and Dorothy Day as they turned to ancient church traditions in shaping the hospitality of the Catholic Worker. Day writes that she was moved by Maurin's quotation from St. Jerome "that every house should have a 'Christ room' for our brother who was in need."⁹ Viewing our spare beds or guest rooms as belonging to Christ might prompt us to open our homes to some of the "least" with whom Jesus identified.

Homes can be very modest, with little space to spare and few amenities, but they can be the site for wonderful hospitality. Making people feel welcome and "at home" is not the same as entertainment. One couple, with years of experience offering hospitality to countless people every day, commented, "When hospitality is viewed as entertainment, the house is never ready."

Welcoming people, especially strangers, into our homes does require that someone be at home. This is not a minor issue for single people who live alone and work full time and for families in which all the adults are working outside the home. To offer significant hospitality from our homes will require some rethinking of the relation between work and home, the living arrangements we choose, and the significance we assign to our time away from work.

In contemporary society, a significant portion of the population is growing up in settings where they do not see models of strong families or healthy marriages. Families shaped by deep Christian faith and strong love for one another can offer an extraordinary gift in welcoming others into their homes. In living their lives in front of their guests, they provide a model of a healthy family, warts and all. This is one of the very significant contributions that LABri households have made over the years. Guests learn about the Christian life by living alongside families in the daily give and take of caring for one another. Edith Schaeffer, cofounder of LABri, observed, "For some young people, LABri homes are the first really happy homes they have ever seen.... You can't imagine what the opportunity of eating, doing dishes, helping peel potatoes,

⁸ John Chrysostom, Homily 45 on Acts, NPNF1, vol. 11, p. 277.

⁹Dorothy Day, *House of Hospitality* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1939), xxvi.

being a part of conversation and family prayers in such a variety of homes does, which any amount of lecturing and 'talking about home life' could never do."¹⁰

For those of us concerned about nurturing people in Christian faith, home-based hospitality is a rich practice. In a hospitable household, conversation and meals are closely linked, and people are nourished through both. Martin Luther relished conversation at meals "for discourses are the real condiments of food if ... they are seasoned with salt. For word is whetted by word; and not only is the belly fed with food, but the heart is also fed with doctrine."¹¹ Reformers viewed homes and meals as a crucial setting for "edifying discourse" and growth in faith. A Benedictine monk noted that what we now call spiritual direction was often provided in the past by mothers and grandmothers in the neighborhood who always had a pot of coffee brewing in their kitchen. People knew they could stop by, talk, and leave with more clarity and insight. And the wise woman simply gave them a cup of coffee."

Around a dinner table, family and guests share food and life. Providing a meal for guests does not involve elaborate menus any more than welcoming them requires well-furnished guest rooms. "We honor guests as we focus our primary attention on them, not on the food. Hospitality will be most satisfying for both host and guest when we serve foods ... that are easy to prepare, serve, and eat."¹² Inability to cook should not be a barrier to offering welcome. Practitioners suggested that even if we pick up a pizza or open cans of soup to share, they should be offered with joy and without apology.

A preliminary step in recovering hospitality might be to renew the practice of festive Sunday dinners. With a minimal amount of preparation, we could be intentional about including a few extra people who might welcome the happy combination of food and companionship. Families could make it more of a habit to invite several additional folks to participate in holiday celebrations and special events. Single people can join together or with families to share in the work of preparing meals and making a place for hospitality.

Home in its best sense is a place of security, rest, and provision. It houses the most fundamental and intimate relations and commitments. But homes can be troubled, dangerous, and filled with injustice when the people within them are estranged or abusive. Such brokenness does not negate or eliminate the human need for home or home-based hospitality, but it does require that we attend to the potential distortions, and avoid sentimentality and naivete. If such households attempt to offer hospitality, guests are often caught in complicated webs of anger and loneliness.

In making a place for hospitality, parents worry about the impact on their children of a steady stream of strangers. Obviously, the impact is mixed and depends partly on the kinds of strangers

¹⁰ Edith Schaeffer, *Dear Family: The L:Abri Family Letters: 1961-1986* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), p. 187.

¹¹ Luther, *Works*, vol. 3: *Lectures on Genesis Chapters 15-20* (St. Louis: Concordia, cordia, 1961), p. 200.

¹² Joetta Handrich Schlabach, *Extending the Table . . . A World Community Cookbook* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1991), 74.

welcomed and partly on family dynamics. But the testimony of a number of families who raised their children to adulthood in the setting of hospitality is that it was very enriching for the children. Children's lives were much fuller because of the added gifts, skills, and experiences that guests brought into their home. As they developed deep affection for some of the guests, children learned to love people whose brokenness was not readily healed. Children matured earlier and often developed deep compassion for others.

Homes provide a safe place for healing. Individuals and families can offer a place for bereaved, exhausted, and sick people to recover health and regain strength. Homes are also an important setting for building relationships that cut across cultural, ethnic, and racial differences. Numerous visitors from other countries have expressed surprise and disappointment at the infrequency with which they are invited into homes in the United States. In many other societies, inviting a visiting foreigner into one's home for a meal is an act of ordinary courtesy. Although sharing a meal in a restaurant is a common practice today, it is not a full substitute for the more personal character of home-based hospitality.

Hospitality practiced in the homes of Christian people is a key foundation for hospitality in the church. As a pastor of a vibrant multiethnic congregation in Los Angeles noted, "The front door of the home is the side door of the church."

A Place in the Church

Understanding the church as God's household has significant implications for hospitality. More than anywhere else, when we gather as church our practice of hospitality should reflect God's gracious welcome. God is host, and we are all guests of God's grace. However, in individual churches, we also have opportunities to act as hosts who welcome others, making a place for strangers and sojourners.

Churches are potentially rich settings for nurturing a life of hospitality. In some churches, expanding the hospitality that members offer to one another would be an important first step. Churches that have not nurtured a common life among members will find hospitality to strangers quite difficult. But churches who do have a rich common life can sometimes overlook strangers in their attention to, and care for, one another.

Occasionally, churches embrace a model of hospitality to strangers in an attempt to get past racial, ethnic, and other distinctions. A gracious spirit of welcome, equality, and care can help in efforts to heal racial divisions and previous exclusions. Generous and steady hospitality, practiced among believers from different backgrounds, can be the beginning of significant reconciliation.

However, such hospitality is more complex than welcoming "those people into our church" or "making room at our table." In the church, especially, it is not our table to which we welcome people; it is God's table to which we come as equals. We may act as hosts in particular churches

where we need to welcome individual persons, but as the household of God, the situation is more complicated. When people from minority groups or those with disabilities have not been present in churches of the dominant culture, congregational response may need to include repentance. A church may need to acknowledge that had it been a responsible steward of God's household, these new "guests" would have had an equal place in God's house from the beginning.

Churches, like families, need to eat together to sustain their identity as a community. The table is central to the practice of hospitality in home and church - the nourishment we gain there is physical, spiritual, and social. Whether we gather around the table for the Lord's Supper or for a church potluck dinner, we are strengthened as a community.

An important contemporary testimony to the significance of shared meals comes from the black church tradition. Jualynne Dodson and Cheryl Townsend Gilkes explain:

African American church members in the United States feed one another's other's bodies as they feed their spirits or, more biblically, one another's "temples of the Holy Spirit." In the process, an ethic of love and an emphasis on hospitality emerge, especially in the sharing of food, which spill over into the larger culture. Ritual moments of most African Americans occur at home and in their churches, and they are connected to food, meals, and their remembrance.¹³

They note further that such meals are tied to anticipating the eschatological cal banquet, the "welcome table" with its abundance:

It is this hospitality, this love, that is symbolized in the preparation and giving of food. The love ethic that pervades the ideology of African American churches is constantly underscored and reaffirmed in the exchanges of food and the celebration of church events with grand meals. This love and this hospitality remind the congregation that they are pilgrims and strangers and that as they feed somebody one day, they may stand in need on another.¹⁴

Dodson and Gilkes conclude, 'And in a world of hatred and conflict, with its racism and deprivations, the saints are able to sit together at their welcome tables and remind one another in the giving and receiving of food, that they may continue to believe that 'the greatest of these is love.' There is nothing like church food."¹⁵

Meals shared together in church provide opportunities to sustain relationships and to build new ones. They establish a space which is personal without being private; an excellent setting in

¹³ Jualynne Dodson and Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, "There's Nothing Like Church Food," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63/3 (Fall 1995), 520-21.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 535.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 536.

which to begin friendships with strangers. Further recognition of the significance of potluck dinners may help us sustain a practice that is often under-appreciated as an expression of hospitality.

Congregations committed to ministering to people in need sometimes times overlook their own greatest resource - the fellowship of believers. In an insightful discussion of the distinction between "church" and "mission"¹⁶ Kathryn Mowry uses the example of urban congregations that choose to remain in changing neighborhoods:

It seems that one trend for such urban congregations is that the "mission" becomes social involvement while the "church" remains limited to a fellowship of urban missionaries. This is not a typical fortress mentality. Churches provide food distribution, and housing and employment programs to reach out to the stranger, but the church continues to struggle at the point of extending community to the stranger. Many urban churches have reached out through elaborate and costly programs, but a fence of professional distance remains. They have not allowed the stranger to be one with them.¹⁷

Mowry acknowledges that while certain "fences" are necessary, other more invisible walls around the church keep the congregation from extending "our most transformational resource: our being together." Poignantly capturing the difference between relationships in a church's coffee hour after worship and in its soup kitchen during the week, Mowry comments, "I wonder how many times of shared laughter over coffee cups does it take to make up for one time of standing in a food line holding a number."¹⁸

Churches have generally done better with offering food programs and providing clothing closets than with welcoming into worship people significantly different from their congregations. Because we are unaware of the significance of our friendship and fellowship, our best resources often remain inaccessible to strangers. But it is also the case that building friendships across significant social differences can be challenging. Churches have the material, social, and spiritual resources to practice vibrant expressions of hospitality, yet the sad testimony from a number of practitioners of hospitality is that the people they welcome often do not find welcome in local churches.

Jean Vanier writes that "Welcome is one of the signs that a community is alive. To invite others to live with us is a sign that we aren't afraid, that we have a treasure of truth and of peace to

¹⁶ Kathryn Mowry, "Do Good Fences Make Good Neighbors?" in *God So Loves the City*, ed. Charles Van Engen and Jude Tiersma (World Vision: MARC, 1994), 117. Mowry notes that sometimes congregations "separate giving completely from the place where they do their receiving." She credits Charles Van Engen with describing this distinction "as a separation between 'church' and 'mission'" (Charles Van Engen, *God's Missionary People* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991]).

¹⁷ Mowry, "Do Good Fences Make Good Neighbors?" 107.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 108-9.

share." He also offers an important warning: "A community which refuses to welcome - whether through fear, weariness, insecurity, a desire to cling to comfort, or just because cause it is fed up with visitors - is dying spiritually."

He writes, "In years to come, we are going to need many small communities which will welcome lost and lonely people, offering them a new form of family and a sense of belonging. In the past, Christians who wanted to follow Jesus opened hospitals and schools. Now that there are so many of these, Christians must commit themselves to the new communities of welcome, to live with people who have no other family, and to show them that they are loved and can grow to greater freedom and that they, in turn, can love and give life to others. For, in the words of an Irish proverb, '*It is in the shelter of each other that the people live.*'"¹⁹



Christine D. Pohl is professor emerita of church in society at Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, Kentucky. She has also written *Living Into Community: Cultivating Practices That Sustain Us*. Dr. Pohl worked in various ministries for 11 years before attending seminary. She owned a Christian bookstore for six years and later worked in advocacy and refugee resettlement. She currently serves as an occasional advisor for homeless shelters and refugee programs. She has also helped plant four churches.

¹⁹ Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth*, rev. ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 266-67